

WASHINGTON, D. C. 20505

Deputy for National Intelligence

13 September 1977

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

VIA : The Honorable Zbigniew Brzezinski
Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs

FROM : Deputy N/I to Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT : "The Next Two Years: Brezhnev, or a Succession?
Implications for US Policy"

1. Some time back Bill Hyland requested a careful intelligence look at these questions:

-- How do we estimate Brezhnev's current personal and political health? What are the chances of his leaving power in the next year or two?

-- If Brezhnev leaves power within the next year or two, how long and orderly or otherwise is the early succession period likely to be?

-- What are the short-term policy implications of the succession for the US?

-- What succession scenarios are likely? Possible? With what varying policy implications for the US?

2. State/INR, CIA and NSA have worked out some answers in the attached memorandum.

15/
Robert R. Bowie

Attachment

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Covering Memo from DCI to President

Distribution:

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Intelligence Memorandum

**THE NEXT TWO YEARS:
BREZHNEV, OR A SUCCESSION?
IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY**

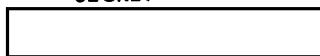
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THE NEXT TWO YEARS: BREZHNEV, OR A SUCCESSION? IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY *

THE QUESTIONS

How do we estimate Brezhnev's current personal and political health? What are the chances of his leaving power in the next year or two?

If Brezhnev leaves power within the next year or two, how long and orderly or otherwise is the early succession period likely to be?

What are the short-term policy implications of the succession for the United States?

What succession scenarios are likely? Possible? With what varying policy implications for the United States?

This paper was prepared under the auspices of the Acting National Intelligence Officer for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, with drafting by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, and by the Central Intelligence Agency. It was reviewed by working-level specialists on the Soviet leadership in State/INR, CIA, and the National Security Agency.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Brezhnev's Staying Power

- Barring an unlikely but unpredictable heart attack or stroke, there is no specific reason to expect Brezhnev to die in the next year or two, or be incapacitated enough to have to leave office.
- We judge that his colleagues would seek to remove Brezhnev outright, or ease him into figurehead status, only if they perceived that he was no longer consistent or vigorous enough to run the country, or—perhaps somewhat less likely—that the balance of his power and theirs urgently needed redressing.
- On balance, we think there is a better than even chance that Brezhnev will remain in office for the next year or two.

Nature of the Succession Process

- Whenever Brezhnev leaves, we expect that the succession will be in two phases, rather than clean and decisive. The first will be when Brezhnev is replaced as party boss and head of the party Secretariat; and the second and longer phase when the new senior secretary attempts effectively to consolidate his power. The new leader must gain a working majority in the Politburo. Winning this influence comes chiefly through control of the Secretariat and its powerful staff departments, the government's economic ministries, the security organs and military command, and the party's territorial organizations in the cities and republics.
- It has taken several years—an average of about five, depending on the criteria one uses in marking when the new top leader has consolidated power—to resolve each of the three previous succession crises.
- Brezhnev himself is unlikely to want or be able to arrange the succession definitively.

Policy Implications

- The USSR currently faces serious economic and political problems. The economic ones, in particular, are expected to worsen during the next half-dozen years. These problems will complicate efforts to resolve an early Brezhnev succession and

consolidate power. It is thus more likely than not that the early years of the succession will be more troubled, at least within leadership circles.

- It is most likely that the new leadership will be more collegial than it has been in the recent past and will probably avoid taking foreign policy initiatives with far-reaching implications. Soviet foreign policy focus is likely to be on urgent matters rather than on items which require long-term planning and consensus-building among various elite groups. The leadership would, of course, respond vigorously to perceived significant threats to Soviet security or interests. Otherwise, its energies will be devoted primarily to domestic concerns.
- Political succession will probably slow down the pace of Soviet-US relations and tend to a further gradual cooling. Selective detente, however, should remain the framework of Soviet foreign policy after Brezhnev. A loss of momentum in the conduct of detente need not result in an overall destabilization of the US-Soviet relationship.
- Specific policies of interest to the United States such as arms control, the Middle East, and trade could easily get tangled in succession politics. The influence of those elements urging a higher priority for maintenance of internal self-sufficiency, furthering the socialist movement, and, perhaps, projection of Moscow's influence to areas abroad rather than limited cooperation with the United States could increase markedly. In these circumstances, the potentialities for Soviet miscalculations in dealing with the non-Communist world would be considerably higher than in the recent past.

Succession Scenarios

- Brezhnev's colleagues might ease him into figurehead status should his performance become uneven enough to cause them to conclude he could no longer handle the job of general secretary, instead of pushing him out of the leadership altogether into retirement. Brezhnev might reluctantly prefer to acquiesce. Should this occur, Brezhnev's own policy influence would presumably be drastically curtailed, and the above policy implications of a collective period of succession would probably obtain.
- Brezhnev's actual departure from office in the next year or two would give Kirilenko, now 71 and Brezhnev's unofficial deputy in the party, perhaps a 70-percent chance of becoming general secretary. All things considered, however, a reasonable estimate

of the probability that Kirilenko would be able to consolidate his rule and maintain it for several years is less than even, say 30 percent, and the greater likelihood is that there would be two successions.

- There is perhaps a 30-percent chance that someone else will succeed Brezhnev even initially. While he is unlikely to come from outside the present top leadership, he could be any one of a number of men now in it. These leaders each at present have one or more handicaps to overcome in filling out their credentials for a claim to the top job. If the Brezhnev succession is delayed or, as may well happen, occurs in two or more stages, one or more of these men could well improve their power and experience. Should a younger man succeed in the next year or two, the initial succession crisis might be sharper and the leadership's instability more manifest than under Kirilenko, with an even stronger urge to concentrate on domestic affairs and with conflicting tendencies in foreign policy.
- There is an outside chance—say, 10 percent initially and 20 to 30 percent later on—that a strong, innovative, new general secretary will emerge to capitalize on the manifest need to rejuvenate the Politburo, Central Committee, and middle levels of the party as well as to stimulate the economy. Such a succession scenario would probably impact most on United States interests, as the party chief would be less dependent on the collective and freer to pursue dynamic policies, for better or worse.

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